

February 2, 2009

To the Environment Committee of the Connecticut State Legislature:

I am writing in favor of Denise Merrill's proposal to charge a \$0.05 fee for plastic bags. I have two concerns about plastic bags: first, where do they go after use, and second, where do they come from in the first place.

Plastic bags present a terrible disposal problem. In spite of the fact that some of them are recyclable, very few of them appear to meet that fate; I have yet to see a receptacle for plastic bag collection in any store I have shopped in. No. Most of them presumably go into our over-loaded waste stream; that is if they don't end up on the side of the road or on our hiking trails.

The raw material for plastic bags is that very precious, mostly imported, and yes, finite, material: petroleum. If we're going to make plastic out of it, let's save it for things we really need, for example tubing for medical uses. One statistic floating around says that in America, 60,000 plastic bags are used every five seconds. Even if that's not accurate, a quick estimate tells us that we're using a heck of a lot of plastic bags as temporary receptacles for our purchases.

In fact, as much as I support the proposal, I do not think it goes far enough. What will happen if we discourage people from using plastic bags when they shop? For the most part, they'll use paper instead. If we want to start to solve disposal problems and use resources more wisely, shouldn't we be encouraging sensible usage in general? Although I'm seeing more people using re-usable canvas bags at the super markets, they're still few and far between. I watch as the person in front of me checks out of the super market with one container of milk, more easily carried by the handle, but put into a plastic bag anyway, or as the check-out employee surrounds paper bags with plastic bags.

Almost ten years ago when I was teaching an environmental chemistry class, we had a discussion about what would encourage the students and others to change habits: use fluorescent bulbs, public transportation, re-usable bags. Would understanding the science behind the issues do it? The first student to speak offered his view that the only way people, himself included, would change was if the change benefited them economically. Most of the other students concurred.

This proposal does not ask people to pay an extra nickel every time they go shopping; there is an alternative. After an initial very small outlay for re-usable bags (I've received many of mine free from various organizations), shopping would cost them nothing. The proposal would also diminish both our profligate use of resources and our disposal problem. But for those who are willing to spend the extra nickel, what better place for it to go than to the DEP?

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